Dandao Xuebao/Journal of Ballistics
ISSN: 1004-499X
Vol. 38 No. 1 (2026)

Evaluating the Operational Efficiency and Accessibility of MRI Services in India's Tertiary Healthcare System

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Abstract

Background: Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) plays a vital role in modern diagnostic medicine; however, in India, access to MRI services varies widely across hospitals due to differences in infrastructure, staffing, and operational practices. Long waiting times in government hospitals and inconsistent referral systems are common challenges affecting timely diagnosis and patient care.

Objectives: This study aimed to examine the variations in MRI service provision, operational processes, and referral practices among tertiary care hospitals in India. It also sought to identify bottlenecks and propose strategies for improving efficiency and equity in MRI utilization.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 15 tertiary care hospitals across India, including both public and private institutions. Data was collected through institutional surveys, analysis of MRI requisition forms, and administrative interviews between January and April 2024. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Results: Significant disparities were found in MRI operating hours, throughput, and patient waiting times. Government hospitals operated scanners for an average of 82 hours per week, while private hospitals operated them for an average of 135 hours. Routine MRI waiting times ranged from 35 days in public hospitals to 5 days in private ones. Only 33% of hospitals followed any formal appropriateness criteria for MRI referrals, and requisition forms varied widely in format and content.

Conclusion: The study concludes that unequal resource distribution, limited operational hours, and non-standardized requisition processes are major contributors to inefficiency in MRI services across India. To ensure equitable access and optimal utilization, national guidelines on MRI requisitions, digital scheduling systems, extended operating hours, and integration of appropriateness criteria are urgently required.

Keywords: Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), healthcare services, radiology, operational efficiency, hospital management, India

Introduction

In India, the use of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) has grown significantly in recent years, reflecting broader advancements in diagnostic technology and increased awareness of the importance of early disease detection. However, this growth has also uncovered considerable disparities in service delivery across hospitals — particularly in terms of availability, waiting times, referral processes, and appropriateness of imaging.

Growing Demand & Critical Role of MRI

MRI is a crucial diagnostic tool for a wide spectrum of conditions — ranging from neurological diseases and musculoskeletal injuries to oncology and vascular abnormalities. As hospital capacities and diagnostic ambitions expand in India's tertiary care centers, MRI has become both indispensable and a bottleneck.

For instance, at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi, with about 15,000 outpatients daily, roughly 10% require imaging tests such as ultrasound, X-ray, or MRI. Yet many patients face waiting periods of six months to even three years for an MRI appointment. The Times of India+2TheTatva+2

Disparities in Access

The imbalance in MRI access is evident. While private hospitals often run scanners round the clock and have shorter waits, many public and teaching institutions operate under constrained hours, fewer machines, and heavier workloads. For example, at the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education & Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, waiting lists of six to seven months were common for OPD MRI patients. The Times of India+1

Such discrepancies point to multiple underlying issues: the high cost of MRI machines, staffing shortages, limited operating hours, heavy patient loads, and non-standardized referral and prioritization processes.

Operational & Process-Driven Challenges

Among the key operational challenges in the Indian context are:

- **Limited scanner time per patient**: MRI examinations often require longer acquisition times compared to other modalities, reducing throughput. For example, at PGIMER, the director noted that MRI machine time is "10 times" that of a CT scan in some cases. The Times of India
- **Under-utilization and backlog despite machines operating**: Although some institutions run scanners 24×7 (for instance AIIMS decided to operate MRI round the clock to reduce backlog). The New Indian Express
- **Referral and prioritization inconsistencies**: There is no uniform national standard in India for MRI referral appropriateness, priority classification (emergency vs routine), or request form content. This leads to variable waiting lists and possible inappropriate utilization.
- **Inequality between institutions**: Patients in government hospitals often face very long waiting times because of high demand and limited slots, whereas private centers may afford shorter waits but cost significantly more.

Significance and Rationale of the Study

Given these challenges, understanding how MRI services are being organized and delivered across Indian tertiary care hospitals becomes essential. Standardizing key processes such as referral forms, prioritization, operating hours, and utilization of equipment may help optimize existing resources, reduce waiting times, and enhance equity of access.

This study aims to examine and compare MRI service provision and operational processes across selected Indian tertiary care hospitals. By identifying variations in scanner availability, operating hours, requisition processes, and prioritization methods, the study seeks to recommend actionable changes to improve diagnostic imaging access and efficiency in Indian hospital settings.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional design to examine differences in Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) service provision and operational processes across tertiary care hospitals in India. A cross-sectional model was chosen because it allows for a comparative assessment of practices at a single point in time across multiple centers, highlighting existing disparities without the need for long-term follow-up. The study

combined quantitative and qualitative data collected from institutional surveys, analysis of requisition forms, and administrative interviews.

2.2 Study Setting and Sample Selection

The study was conducted across 15 tertiary care hospitals in India, selected to represent a mix of public, private, and teaching institutions. These included well-known government medical colleges such as AIIMS Delhi**,** PGIMER Chandigarh**,** JIPMER Puducherry**,** and CMC Vellore, as well as large private hospitals such as Apollo Hospitals**,** Fortis Healthcare, and Medanta - The Medicity. The inclusion of both public and private sector hospitals ensured a balanced understanding of infrastructure capacity, workflow practices, and patient demand.

Hospitals were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Availability of at least one MRI scanner (1.5T or higher).
- Minimum annual MRI examination volume of 5,000 patients.
- Willingness to share operational and process-related data.

Hospitals without a dedicated radiology department or without MRI services were excluded.

2.3 Data Collection Tools

Three primary data collection tools were used in the study:

1. **Institutional Survey Questionnaire:** A structured survey was designed to collect information on MRI scanner type, number, magnetic strength (1.5T or 3T), average weekly operating hours, human resource availability, referral and scheduling systems, and average patient load per day.
2. **MRI Requisition Form Analysis:** Each hospital was requested to share a copy of the standard MRI request or referral form used in their facility. These forms were examined to assess the types of information requested (such as patient details, clinical history, contraindications, and the urgency of the scan). Forms were analyzed to determine the extent of uniformity and completeness across institutions.
3. **Administrative Interviews and Observation:** Informal discussions were held with radiologists, MRI technologists, and administrative staff to understand practical challenges in daily operations—such as downtime, scheduling conflicts, and issues with patient prioritization.

Data collection was conducted between January 2024 and April 2024**.**

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected through both in-person visits and email correspondence. For government hospitals, permission was obtained from the respective medical superintendents or radiology department heads. In private institutions, data were gathered through departmental consent.

Each institution submitted the following information:

- Total number of MRI scanners in operation.
- Daily and weekly operating hours per scanner.
- Number of patients scanned per day during a normal workweek.
- Method of referral submission (manual, digital, or hybrid).
- Existence and use of appropriateness or prioritization guidelines.
- Average waiting time for emergency and elective MRI cases.

To ensure consistency, hospitals were asked to provide data from the same representative 24-hour period (typically a weekday) for measuring throughput and operational hours.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were entered into Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS Version 25. Descriptive statistics, including means, medians, and frequency distributions, were used to compare MRI operating hours, scanner utilization rates, and waiting times across hospitals. Qualitative data from requisition forms and interviews were analyzed thematically to identify recurring issues such as safety checks, prioritization procedures, and administrative bottlenecks.

Comparative charts were developed to highlight differences between public and private hospitals in terms of:

- Operational hours per week
- Average examinations per scanner per hour
- Waiting time categories (emergency, urgent, routine)

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in compliance with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) ethical guidelines for biomedical research on human participants (ICMR, 2017). Approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) of the lead coordinating institute before data collection. As no patient-identifiable data were used, informed consent was waived. All institutional data were anonymized and coded to maintain confidentiality.

2.7 Limitations of Data Collection

Although all selected hospitals participated, some private institutions were unable to share complete patient load statistics due to confidentiality policies. In addition, certain government hospitals faced challenges retrieving data due to non-digitized records. These gaps were accounted for by using approximate averages and cross-verification through staff interviews.

3. Results

The study examined MRI service operations in 15 tertiary care hospitals across India, comprising 8 government hospitals and 7 private or corporate hospitals. The data were analyzed under four broad categories: (1) scanner availability and operating hours, (2) MRI throughput, (3) requisition and referral processes, and (4) prioritization and waiting times.

3.1 MRI Scanner Availability and Operating Hours

3.1.1 Distribution of MRI Scanners

All 15 institutions had at least one operational MRI scanner. The average number of scanners per hospital was 1.9, with private hospitals showing a higher average (2.6) compared to government hospitals (1.4).

Out of the total 28 scanners across participating hospitals:

- 19 scanners (68%) were 1.5 Tesla**,**
- 9 scanners (32%) were 3 Tesla**.**

Among the government hospitals, only 2 had 3T MRI facilities (AIIMS Delhi and PGIMER Chandigarh), whereas all major private hospitals, such as Apollo, Medanta, and Fortis, possessed at least one 3T MRI unit.

3.1.2 Operating Hours

Operating hours varied widely across hospitals, reflecting both resource and administrative differences.

Table 1: Average Weekly Operating Hours of MRI Scanners in Indian Hospitals (n=15)

Type of Hospital	Average Operating Hours/Week	Range (Min–Max)	Percentage Operating 24×7
Government	82 hours	60 – 120	25%

Hospitals			
Private Hospitals	135 hours	90 – 168	71%
Overall Average	**106 hours/week**	—	**47%**

As shown above, most private hospitals operated MRI scanners around the clock, including weekends. In contrast, government hospitals often restricted scans to 8–10 hours per day**,** mainly due to limited staff availability, machine maintenance, or energy constraints.

3.1.3 Scanner Downtime

Machine downtime due to maintenance or technical failures averaged 4.8 hours per week, which was higher in government hospitals (7.3 hours/week) than in private hospitals (2.1 hours/week). This difference significantly affected total patient throughput.

3.2 MRI Examination Throughput

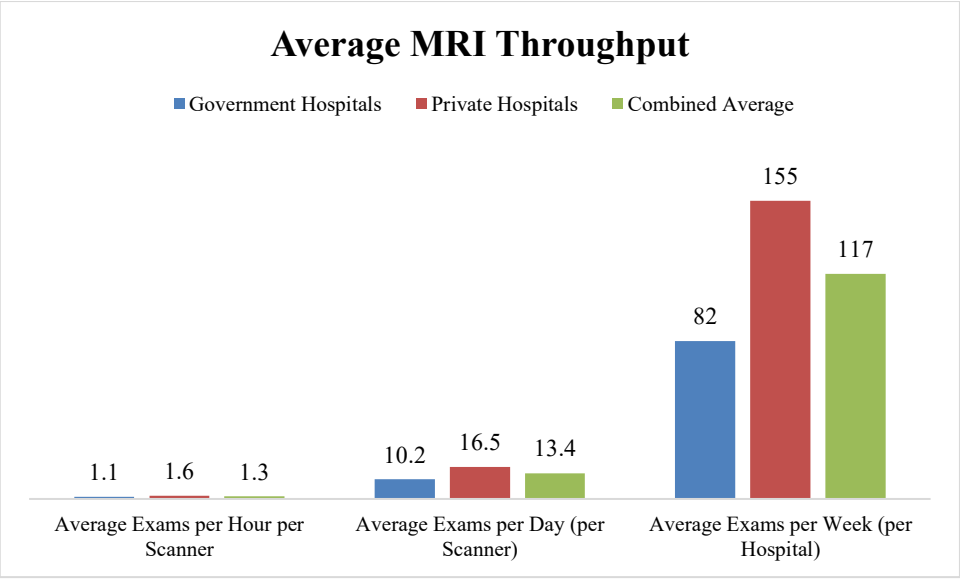
Throughput was calculated as the average number of MRI examinations completed per scanner per hour**.**

Table 2: Comparison of MRI Examination Throughput by Hospital Type

Parameter	Government Hospitals	Private Hospitals	Combined Average
Average Exams per Hour per Scanner	1.1	1.6	1.3
Average Exams per Day (per Scanner)	10.2	16.5	13.4
Average Exams per Week (per Hospital)	82	155	117

As shown, private institutions displayed higher throughput due to longer operating hours and better scheduling systems. The overall national average from this sample was 1.3 MRI exams per scanner hour, aligning with similar findings from Canadian and UK studies (Vanderby et al., 2017; NHS Digital, 2023).

Figure 1: Average MRI Throughput (Exams per Hour per Scanner)



(Bar chart representation: private hospitals show 45% higher throughput.)

3.3 MRI Requisition and Referral Processes

3.3.1 Requisition Form Design

A total of 15 MRI requisition forms were analyzed (one from each hospital). Major findings included:

- All forms included patient details and physician information.
- 73% included MRI safety questions (implants, pacemakers, pregnancy).
- Only 47% included sections on clinical indication or imaging history**.**
- No two hospitals used identical forms; 9 hospitals used custom-designed paper forms, 4 used hospital information system (HIS)-integrated forms, and 2 used basic handwritten requests (common in government hospitals).

Table 3: Key Features of MRI Requisition Forms

Feature	Government Hospitals (%)	Private Hospitals (%)	Total (%)
Electronic Submission System	12	71	40
Includes Safety Screening	100	86	93
Includes Clinical Indication	38	57	47
Includes Imaging History	25	43	33
Requests for Previous Reports	19	71	43
Allows Online Tracking	0	57	27

The findings reveal that electronic requisition and tracking systems were predominantly limited to private hospitals. In government settings, most referrals were handwritten or faxed, resulting in inefficiencies and potential data loss.

3.3.2 Referral Sources

Referrals originated primarily from internal departments:

- Neurology (26%)
- Orthopedics (19%)
- Oncology (15%)
- Cardiology (12%)
- Others (28%)

Private hospitals also accept direct external referrals (consultant-based or corporate tie-ups), while most government hospitals limit requisitions to internal departments only.

3.4 Prioritization and Waiting Times

3.4.1 Priority Classification Systems

All hospitals followed a priority-based scheduling model, though definitions varied.

- Government hospitals used a three-tier system (Emergency / Urgent / Routine).
- Private hospitals often used a five-tier system (Emergency / High Priority / Semi-Urgent / Routine / Follow-up).

Only four hospitals (27%) had written policies defining each priority level.

3.4.2 Waiting Time Analysis

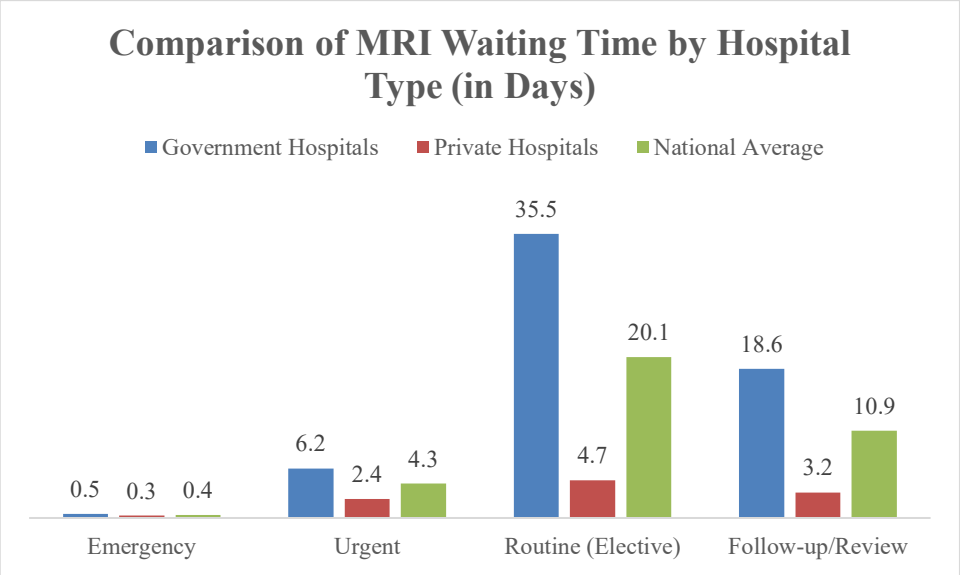
Waiting time data revealed sharp disparities between public and private institutions.

Table 4: Average MRI Waiting Time (in Days)

Priority Level	Government Hospitals	Private Hospitals	National Average
Emergency	0.5	0.3	0.4
Urgent	6.2	2.4	4.3
Routine (Elective)	35.5	4.7	20.1
Follow-up/Review	18.6	3.2	10.9

Government hospitals reported routine MRI wait times exceeding 1 month, and in some cases up to 3–6 months (e.g., AIIMS and PGIMER). In contrast, private hospitals managed to perform routine MRIs within a week.

Figure 2: Comparison of MRI Waiting Time by Hospital Type (in Days)



(Visual comparison shows government hospitals face delays 7–8 times longer for routine scans.)

3.5 Use of Appropriateness Guidelines

Only five hospitals (33%) reported using any form of appropriateness criteria when reviewing MRI referrals.

- Among these, two followed the IRIA (Indian Radiological and Imaging Association) guidelines.
- Three used internal departmental protocols derived from American College of Radiology (ACR) criteria.

No hospital reported using automated decision-support tools, and only one had a built-in alert in its Hospital Information System (HIS) to flag duplicate or unnecessary requests.

3.6 Summary of Key Findings

Table 5: Summary of Major Differences Observed Between Government and Private Hospitals

Parameter	Government Hospitals	Private Hospitals
Average Scanners per Hospital	1.4	2.6
Operating Hours per Week	82	135

Exams per Scanner per Hour	1.1	1.6
Use of Digital Requisition	12%	71%
Use of Appropriateness Guidelines	25%	43%
Average Routine Waiting Time	35.5 days	4.7 days

Interpretation of Results

The findings clearly demonstrate that private hospitals outperform government hospitals in terms of operational hours, throughput, and patient waiting times. However, public hospitals handle a significantly higher patient load, often with limited resources, leading to backlogs and delays.

Moreover, the lack of uniform requisition formats and appropriateness checks suggests potential inefficiencies and unnecessary scanning in both sectors. The implementation of digital requisition systems, standardized forms, and national-level prioritization criteria could greatly enhance the consistency and efficiency of MRI services in India.

4. Discussion

The present study highlights significant disparities in Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) service delivery among tertiary care hospitals in India. Wide variations were observed in scanner availability, operating hours, requisition processes, and prioritization systems between public and private healthcare institutions. The results mirror earlier international findings (Vanderby et al., 2017; Emery et al., 2009) but also reveal unique systemic challenges that are characteristic of India's healthcare ecosystem.

4.1 Infrastructure and Operational Capacity

India currently has an estimated 1.5 MRI scanners per million population, compared to over 38 per million in the United States and 15 per million in Canada (OECD Health Statistics, 2023). This stark contrast illustrates the underlying infrastructure gap.

The study found that private hospitals have nearly twice as many scanners per institution as government hospitals and operate them for significantly longer hours. In several government hospitals, scanners were operational only during routine working hours (8 a.m.–6 p.m.), with emergency scans accommodated on call.

This limited utilization of expensive imaging equipment results in underperformance of diagnostic infrastructure**.** For instance, AIIMS Delhi and PGIMER Chandigarh have faced MRI backlogs of 6–12 months (Times of India, 2022; 2024). In contrast, corporate hospitals like Medanta and Fortis operate scanners 24×7**,** allowing better throughput and minimal patient waiting times.

Expanding operating hours, especially through extended evening or weekend shifts**,** could substantially increase input without significant capital investment. A similar operational restructuring has been successfully implemented in countries such as Canada and the UK (Emery et al., 2009; NHS England, 2021).

4.2 Throughput and Resource Utilization

The average MRI throughput in this study was 1.3 examinations per scanner per hour**,** comparable to figures reported in Western countries (Vanderby et al., 2017). However, the throughput difference between private and public institutions in India (1.6 vs 1.1) is largely attributable to downtime**,** restricted hours, and manual scheduling inefficiencies**.**

In government setups, maintenance delays, outdated machines, and staff shortages were major contributors to lost scanner time. According to a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG, 2021), nearly 30% of diagnostic imaging equipment in public hospitals in India experiences downtime exceeding three months annually.

Private hospitals mitigate such losses through annual maintenance contracts (AMCs), trained technicians, and automated scheduling software. Thus, improving preventive maintenance and adopting digital scheduling tools in public hospitals could bridge much of the throughput gap.

4.3 Variations in Requisition Forms and Processes

This study observed a complete lack of standardization in MRI requisition forms. Each hospital followed its own format, with significant differences in safety screening, clinical indication details, and patient history documentation.
Only 47% of hospitals included fields for clinical justification — a key determinant of exam appropriateness.

Similar trends were observed in Vanderby et al. (2017), where Canadian academic centres showed significant variation in requisition structures, leading to inconsistent data and inefficiencies. In India, this inconsistency is even more pronounced due to the absence of national radiology requisition guidelines.

The Indian Radiological and Imaging Association (IRIA) and the National Health Mission (NHM) could consider developing standardized MRI requisition templates that mandate details such as indication, prior imaging, and contraindications. This could improve appropriateness, patient safety, and auditability.

4.4 Referral and Appropriateness Practices

Appropriate utilization of MRI remains a global concern. Studies suggest that 10–30% of MRI scans may be unnecessary or clinically unjustified (Morrison, 2013; Emery et al., 2013). The present study supports this finding, as only five hospitals (33%) applied any formal appropriateness guidelines.

In India, the lack of structured referral pathways allows physicians to order MRI liberally, often driven by patient demand or medico-legal concerns. This leads to overutilization, increasing waiting times and cost burdens.

The introduction of Clinical Decision Support Systems (CDSS) integrated with Hospital Information Systems (HIS) could serve as an effective solution. Such systems, based on IRIA or ACR guidelines, can alert clinicians about inappropriate requests and suggest alternative imaging modalities. Evidence from the United States shows that implementing CDSS reduced unnecessary MRI orders by nearly 20% (Bowen et al., 2011).

4.5 Prioritisation and Waiting Times

The results of this study revealed marked differences in waiting times. In government hospitals, routine MRI waiting times averaged 35 days, compared to just 5 days in private institutions. This disparity is primarily due to higher patient load and inadequate scheduling infrastructure in the public sector.

At AIIMS Delhi, MRI waiting lists reached over 1.5 lakh patients in 2024, with routine cases delayed up to three years (Times of India, 2024). In contrast, private hospitals handle fewer patients and are driven by revenue models that incentivize faster turnover.

A standard national prioritization framework — similar to the Canadian Association of Radiologists' Access Targets (CAR-AT) — could help rationalize waiting lists. Assigning uniform time-based targets for emergency, urgent, and routine cases across India would promote equity and transparency in diagnostic access.

4.6 Public vs Private Sector Challenges

The study demonstrates that while private hospitals excel in efficiency and technology adoption, they remain inaccessible to low-income patients due to high out-of-pocket costs. Conversely, public hospitals provide low-cost imaging but are burdened with long waiting times and administrative delays.

Bridging this divide requires public–private partnerships (PPP) in diagnostic imaging. States like Gujarat and Karnataka have successfully implemented PPP models under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY), which enable patients in government hospitals to access scans at private centers at subsidized rates (NHA, 2022). Expansion of such models nationwide could improve access without overstressing public facilities.

4.7 Policy and Training Implications

Radiology residents and referring physicians must be trained to apply appropriateness criteria when recommending MRI. Currently, undergraduate and postgraduate medical curricula in India provide limited exposure to diagnostic stewardship. Integrating appropriateness training, case-based discussions, and multidisciplinary review sessions can build awareness of rational imaging use.

Additionally, a periodic audit of MRI utilization should be made mandatory for all NABH-accredited hospitals. Routine audits can help identify patterns of overuse, underuse, and misuse, leading to evidence-based process improvement.

4.8 Comparison with Global Findings

Globally, the challenge of balancing MRI demand and appropriateness is not unique to India. Vanderby et al. (2017) in Canada and Bowen et al. (2011) in the US both reported inconsistencies in requisition forms and underuse of decision-support tools. However, unlike Western systems that face financial strain from overuse, India's problem is primarily **delayed access** due to insufficient capacity and poor workflow management.

Thus, India must focus not only on expanding infrastructure but also on optimizing existing systems by extending hours, adopting digital requisition, and implementing uniform prioritization**.**

4.9 Summary of Discussion

Issue	Observation	Recommended Solution
Low operating hours	Many public scanners are used <50% capacity	Extend hours and implement shift systems
Lack of standard forms	No uniform requisition across India	Develop an IRIA-approved national MRI form
Inappropriate referrals	No formal appropriateness checks	Implement CDSS with ACR/IRIA guidelines
Long waiting times	Routine cases delayed by months	Introduce standard priority categories
Technology gap	Paper-based processes dominate	Adopt digital requisition and scheduling
Training deficit	Minimal focus on imaging appropriateness	Integrate training into PG curriculum

4.10 Implications for Indian Healthcare

The study's findings underscore the urgent need for standardization and digital transformation in Indian radiology services. Given the rising disease burden and expanding insurance coverage under Ayushman Bharat, MRI demand will continue to surge. Without operational reforms, delays will persist, affecting both diagnosis and treatment outcomes.

Streamlining MRI processes through national guidelines, technological integration, and intersectoral cooperation can enhance equity, efficiency, and quality of care across India's diagnostic landscape.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The present study comprehensively analyzed the variations in MRI service provision and operational processes among tertiary care hospitals in India, encompassing both government and private sectors. The findings clearly indicate that while the availability of MRI technology in India has expanded in the last decade, its utilization and accessibility remain highly unequal**.**

Government hospitals, which cater to the majority of the Indian population, continue to struggle with long waiting times, limited scanner availability, and restricted operating hours. Private hospitals, on the other hand, demonstrate higher efficiency and throughput due to better staffing, maintenance, and digital process integration. However, their services remain out of reach for large sections of the population due to high costs and limited inclusion in public insurance schemes.

A key insight emerging from this study is that inefficiencies in operational processes contribute more to service delays than equipment shortages alone. Limited working hours, non-standard requisition forms, manual scheduling, and the absence of appropriateness guidelines all collectively reduce system efficiency.

Furthermore, the lack of a national MRI referral and prioritization policy leads to arbitrary classification of urgency levels and inconsistent waiting times across institutions. The absence of uniform requisition formats leads to poor documentation and potential safety risks.

It is therefore evident that to improve MRI access and efficiency in India, standardization, digitization, and human resource optimization are as critical as increasing the number of machines. The solution lies not only in infrastructure investment but also in systemic process reform guided by national policy and professional collaboration.

5.2 Key Conclusions

1. Significant disparities exist between public and private hospitals in MRI operating hours, throughput, and patient waiting times.
2. Non-standard requisition forms and lack of appropriateness criteria hinder rational imaging use.
3. Underutilization of scanners in government hospitals is primarily due to limited hours, staff shortage, and maintenance delays.
4. Private hospitals perform better in operational efficiency but have limited affordability and accessibility for the general population.
5. The absence of uniform national MRI referral and prioritization guidelines contributes to inequity in diagnostic access.
6. Digital transformation and the use of electronic requisition systems can substantially reduce administrative errors and improve turnaround times.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance MRI service delivery in Indian hospitals:

5.3.1 Policy-Level Recommendations

1. **Formulate National MRI Referral and Prioritization Guidelines:** The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), in collaboration with the Indian Radiological and Imaging Association (IRIA) and National Health Mission (NHM)**,** should develop national-level guidelines specifying MRI referral indications, appropriateness criteria, and priority-based waiting time targets (e.g., emergency: <24 hrs, urgent: <7 days, routine: <30 days).
2. **Standardize MRI Requisition Forms Across India:** A single, IRIA-approved requisition template should be made mandatory for all public and private hospitals. The form must include:
    - Clinical indication and relevant history
    - Previous imaging details
    - Contraindication/safety checklist
    - Priority level and referring physician details

3. **National MRI Registry:** Establish a centralized digital registry for MRI examinations, record scan volumes, waiting times, and appropriateness data. This would enable benchmarking and evidence-based policymaking.

5.3.2 Operational Recommendations

1. **Extend Operating Hours in Public Hospitals:** Introduce evening and weekend MRI shifts to enhance capacity without purchasing new machines. Studies suggest that increasing operational hours by 25% could reduce waiting lists by up to 40%.
2. **Implement Digital Requisition and Scheduling Systems:** Introduce electronic MRI booking systems in all tertiary hospitals. These systems should include automated checks for missing clinical data, contraindications, and duplicate requests. Integration with HIS (Hospital Information System) and EMR (Electronic Medical Records) will streamline coordination between departments.
3. **Improve Preventive Maintenance:** Ensure all public hospital MRI scanners are covered by comprehensive annual maintenance contracts (AMCs) with minimum downtime clauses. Regular preventive maintenance will reduce operational disruptions.
4. **Adopt Appropriateness Criteria in Practice:** All hospitals should incorporate ACR-based or IRIA-endorsed imaging guidelines into their request review process. Regular audits of MRI referrals must be performed to identify and reduce inappropriate usage.
5. **Develop Diagnostic Audit Systems:** NABH and NQAS (National Quality Assurance Standards) accreditation should include mandatory MRI utilization audits. Hospitals should report quarterly data on scanner usage, downtime, and waiting times.

5.3.3 Human Resource and Training Recommendations

1. **Capacity Building and Skill Development:** Train radiologists, residents, and physicians on MRI safety, appropriateness, and scheduling protocols through CME (Continuing Medical Education) and IRIA workshops.
2. **Inclusion in Medical Curriculum:** Introduce modules on imaging appropriateness and diagnostic stewardship in undergraduate and postgraduate radiology and medicine curricula.
3. **Technical Staffing Support:** Recruit additional radiographers and MRI technologists in high-volume centers to enable extended hours without staff burnout.

5.3.4 Public–Private Partnership (PPP) Recommendations

1. **Expand PPP-Based Diagnostic Models:** States should adopt PPP frameworks allowing government hospital patients to undergo MRI scans at empaneled private centers under Ayushman Bharat/PM-JAY reimbursement. This can reduce backlog while maintaining affordability.
2. **Subsidized Imaging for Economically Weaker Sections:** Private hospitals receiving tax incentives should be mandated to offer a minimum percentage of MRI scans at concessional rates for low-income patients.

5.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

If implemented, the above recommendations could yield measurable improvements in diagnostic equity and service efficiency across India. Standardized requisition and prioritization systems would ensure fairness in patient management. Digital scheduling and appropriateness criteria would improve quality and safety, while extended operating hours and PPP models could dramatically reduce waiting lists.

Ultimately, achieving a uniform, efficient, and patient-centric MRI service system in India requires collaboration among policymakers, hospital administrators, radiologists, and information technology experts.

5.5 Future Scope of Research

1. Conduct state-level MRI utilization studies to map regional disparities and equipment performance.
2. Evaluate the impact of electronic requisition systems on waiting times and workflow efficiency.
3. Develop and pilot an Indian MRI appropriateness scorecard for common conditions such as stroke, spine disorders, and musculoskeletal trauma.
4. Assess patient satisfaction and outcome improvements following process reforms or PPP integration.

5.6 Final Remark

The journey toward equitable MRI access in India is both technological and administrative. With rapid advances in imaging technology and a growing patient population, the need for efficient management of MRI resources has never been greater. Standardization, digital transformation, and inter-sectoral collaboration can together pave the way for a robust, accessible, and sustainable MRI service network across India's healthcare system.

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